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THE LEGEND OF



WONALANSET



THE
LEGEND OF WONALANSETT

A TALE
OF
THE WHITE HILLS

Charles H. Glidden
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THE LEGEND OF WONALANSETT

I.

The events recorded in this legend belong far back in the dim past. I heard the story as it fell from the lips of a wrinkled old squaw in the White Hills, who sold beaded and braided baskets, and who claimed to be a direct descendant of the Penacook Indians. She told it as it had been handed down in the tribe for more than five hundred years. No history has chronicled the acts set forth in the story of the old squaw; only in the traditions of the red men do they find a place.

In that shadowy age of which the legend treats the land was supremely fertile. It bore wonderful harvests of golden maize and rich fruits, and the waters were full of fish, while in the forests the deer were as plentiful as sparrows. The seasons were not as severe, and the blasts of winter bit less keenly. The waters of Winnepesaukee rose higher then, for they had not cut for themselves so deep a channel through the outlet at Aquidaukenash (The Weirs), and

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the silver waves swashed on many a meadow where now the yellow corn ripens in the sun. The waters of the lake covered the valleys far back, diked by a low line of hillocks which have now in many places disappeared. Mighty forests waved their tall plumes in the summer breezes, and the maize rustled in the September wind.

In those days of long ago the Penacooks were the principal tribe of Indians dwelling beside the Winnepesaukee. The braves of this people ranged from the entrance to the White Hills, to the Atlantic. Their wigwams were scattered about the lake, along the sunny meadows of the Merrimac, and northward to the confines of the Agiacooks.

Beside the Winnepesaukee at Aquidaukenash the Penacooks were encamped. This was the favorite fishing ground of the tribe, and here they delighted to pass many days of the summer months. Passaconaway was sachem of the tribe, and his only son, the pride of his declining years, was Wonalansett. To Passaconaway the braves of all the region from the sacred White Hills to the Piscataqua yielded a willing

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submission. He was mighty in war, and wise in time of peace. Under him the land of the Penacooks prospered. The harvests were plentiful in the fertile meadows, and the corn grew to unusual size. Even the fierce Mohawks, who dwelt away to the westward in the wild Adirondacks, had ceased to molest them, and there was peace on every hand. Many times in the past Passaconaway had led his warriors against the Mohawks encroaching upon his domains, and driven them back to their wigwams and council fires in the Adirondacks. They feared him as they feared no other foe, and they were wont to say that he was in league with some spirit which gave mysterious power to his arm, and made him proof against their weapons.

Wonalansett was a brave young man, and in him his father lived his years over again. He loved the beautiful Mineola, the eldest daughter of the old chief Chocorua, and the aged sachem smiled upon their affection. The form of Mineola was straight and graceful as the willow, and in her eyes there dwelt a world of tenderness.

Rimmon was the youngest daughter of Cho-

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corua. She, too, was lithe and graceful, but though she was beautiful, Mineola surpassed her in loveliness. A long time Wonalansett had loved the gentle Mineola, even from the days when as children they had played together on the shores of the beautiful Winnepesaukee. And even as he loved her, so Mineola loved the young brave; and Rimmon loved him also.

The days of Passaconaway were fourscore years and ten. Old age had set its seal upon him. The fountains of his youth were dried up and slowly his strength ebbed away. His pulse grew weak and feeble, and he felt that he was about to die. And so he sent for Wonalansett and told him that, like the aged oak rocked by a thousand storms, so he must soon fall and lie prostrate in the forest.

“The days of Passaconaway are nearly done,” he said. “He will soon join his fathers in the dim lands of Ponemah. Many moons have passed since first he fitted the arrow to the string by the shores of the Winnepesaukee, and many winters have sifted their snows in his hair. Twenty summers has the maize ripened in the meadows since the squaw of Passa-

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conaway went to the happy hunting grounds, and twenty summers have cast their sunlight upon the face of Wonalansett. Like the aged eagle when his wings are weary, Passaconaway floats away, but when he has taken his last flight, Wonalansett shall be sachem in place of his father."

So the strength of the old sachem waned, and one day he fell asleep. Sorrowfully the people of his tribe laid him at rest in the dark pine forest, and over his grave the winds sighed through the pine branches. There the whip-poor-will sung his mournful song, the wild flowers blossomed, and the little brook babbled past on its way to the lake. And Wonalansett was now sachem in place of his father, and all the people loved him as they had loved the old sachem. Before Passaconaway had grown weary with the burden of years, he had sent for Chocorua, the old chief, and talked to him of their children. And Wonalansett according to the customs of the tribe, wooed Mineola; and the time for the marriage feast was fixed. Then there was great rejoicing throughout the land.

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II.

Far away toward the blazing sunset, amid the wild scenery of the Adirondacks, dwelt the savage Mohawks. Reared under the shadow of the grand old mountains, it was not strange that they partook of the wildness and sternness of their surroundings. They were a terror to the Indians who dwelt near them, and they had often blotted out whole tribes in their warlike excursions.

Of all the Indians dwelling between the Adirondacks and the sea, the Mohawks feared no foe as they feared the Penacooks. These they dreaded more on account of the prowess of Passaconaway than for any other reason. And now the news had come that Passaconaway was dead, and his son Wonalansett was sachem in his stead. So in the council house of the tribe the Mohawk warriors assembled.

Pontiac, the old sachem, arose in the council, his form straight as the gray pine in the forest, and looking around upon his chiefs he said:

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“Many moons have passed over the head of Pontiac since first the fame of Passaconaway was borne to his ears on the east wind, and many Mohawks have since fallen by his hand, as the trees in the forest by the crooked lightning. Their spirits from the far-off shores of Ponemah call upon us to be avenged. While Passaconaway lived the Mohawks feared him; for he was mightier than any Mohawk, and he loved to send his foes unsummoned to the Great Spirit. But the Great Spirit has now called the old sachem to himself, and in Ponemah he chases the shadowy deer beside the murmuring waters; and his son is sachem in his place. The tree which grows by the wigwam of Pontiac was a small shoot when the sunlight first fell upon the face of Wonalansett. It may be that his arm is not the strong arm of his father, nor his cunning as the cunning of the old sachem. But the spirit of Passaconaway may still hover over the hunting grounds of the Penacooks, and it may be that he will wreak a terrible vengeance upon any invader. The sachem of the Mohawks is an old man. He is like the aged oak in the forest through whose branches the

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sap moves in sluggish flow. The trunk is decaying slowly, and not long will it put forth leaves in the springtime when the forest is bursting with life. No longer does the old sachem thirst for the blood of his foes, and he longs to hear the voice of the Great Spirit when it shall summon him to Ponemah. If the Mohawk warriors wish to go to the hunting grounds of the Penacooks, let young Konassaden lead them. But the old sachem fears that where many shall depart few may return. Almost he can see them lying under the shadow of the Great White Hills, their faces upturned to the sky in the stillness of death."

When the old man finished speaking, his son Konassaden arose. He was tall and supple, and with graceful gestures he spoke:

"Is the young hawk stronger than the eagle when the parent birds have left the nest, or will the nestlings put the king of birds to flight? Will the black bear flee when he chances upon the red fox and hide himself among the cliffs lest he be torn in pieces? The summers of Konassaden are few. He is only a slender sapling in the midst of a great forest. But the

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young tree may bend to the blast which up-roots the aged and majestic oak. The heart of Konassaden is not the heart of a squaw, and he knows no fear. The Great Spirit has given his arm some of the power there is in the crooked lightning, and many Penacooks shall fall by his hand. If the Mohawk warriors shall follow him, they will swoop down upon the nest of the hawk whence the parent bird is flown, and overcome the fledgelings that guard it. The old medicine man of the tribe has said that Konassaden shall not fall by the hand of any warrior; neither shall those who follow him to the aerie of the hawk in the pine woods of Aquidaukenash perish at the hands of the Penacooks."

The words of the young man aroused the Mohawks to a thirst for conflict, and when they went forth from the council house it had been decided to go on the warpath to the hunting grounds of the peaceful Penacooks. The next morning they started. A band of five hundred warriors strode noiselessly away toward the dawn, hurrying eagerly on to pitch their camp by the Merrimac and sound their war whoop in the ears of the unsuspecting

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Penacooks. For three days they proceeded on their trail; and now they were not far away from the lake. Their scouts ascertained that the encampment at Aquidaukenash was unguarded. The warriors were away upon a fishing expedition, and only the women and children were there, with a few old men too infirm to join the warriors.

Immediately they fell upon the encampment, captured the women and children and, setting fire to the wigwams and the council house, they put themselves in motion toward the north.

III.

When Wonalansett and his braves returned from their fishing trip they found nothing but devastation where they had left order and peace. The sachem was much disturbed for the safety of Mineola and Rimmon and with his braves he started in swift pursuit of the enemy. They followed the trail along verdant valleys bordered with lofty trees centuries old and covered with gray moss, valleys where harebells blossomed

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and slender willows waved above the soft green carpet; through streams which dashed and swirled in their mad course to the ocean; through deep forests where the sunlight never entered to banish the twilight gloom and drink up the moisture; and over hills which caught the last rays of the setting sun.

Aquidaukenash was now far away, and the trail of the Mohawks was growing fresher. The sun had dropped down the golden west and was almost at the horizon. The warriors were weary with the march, and camp was fixed that they might rest. At early dawn they started on the trail again, and all day they pursued it. As the sun was going down the scouts came in to report that the Mohawks were in a gorge some distance ahead, and were preparing to encamp for the night. Wonalan-sett halted his warriors and determined upon an immediate attack. He waited until all was still in the Mohawk camp, and then with his braves he crept silently along through the forest gloom. The sentinels, wearied with their forced marches, slept at their posts or were unmindful of danger until it was too late to

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give the alarm. They were silenced without awakening the slumbering braves, and then a dash was made for the captives, while at the same moment the Penacook war whoop burst out upon the air. The surprise was complete, and the captives were easily rescued.

The war whoop of the Penacooks had hardly ceased to re-echo in the narrow defile, when the Mohawks, seeing that resistance was useless and their captives were lost, under the lead of Konassaden sprung into the stream, which at this point was shallow near the bank, and entering the narrow gorge cut by the river for its passage, disappeared around one of its sharp angles without a moment's warning. The movement was so utterly unexpected by the Penacooks, that before they had recovered from their surprise the Mohawks had emerged from the gorge some distance up the stream and were hastening with all speed toward the north. Far behind them they could hear the Penacooks pursuing, but the sound soon died away, and a silence which was oppressive succeeded.

After a short time they came to the Ammonoosuc, where it flowed into the Connecticut.

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They followed the course of the former to the northeast, unaware that they were entering the confines of the sacred Agiacooks, where no Penacook was ever known to tread without the command of the medicine man of the tribe. On every side they were surrounded by the everlasting hills, and about them was the stillness of the forest. There was to be heard neither the chirp of the cricket nor the wail of the whip-poor-will. The only sound was the soft foot-fall of the Mohawk warriors as each glided steadily on. They were aware that their pursuers had been left far behind, and yet, like men whose senses are asleep, they continued their way, instinctively, without apparent purpose. The unbroken silence awed them. A presentiment of impending danger began to break in upon their minds. Now their course turns to the right, and leaving the river, they plunge into the pathless forest, where human feet have not trod for many a day.

But who is the chief in whose footsteps they follow without volition of their own? It is dark and they cannot see, but he seems black as night. Blindly they follow him and the

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darkness grows deeper. They have no wills but that of their leader, and he pushes straight on. They are automatons in his hands. The trail grows rougher and the forest is becoming less dense. The way is steep, but they go forward in the same hot haste. Their breath comes quick and fast and their lips are parched with thirst, but the grim warrior speeds on over the uneven ground, and they forget all save an overpowering desire not to fall behind. Though they follow quickly in his footsteps, they never quite approach him. Always he is just a little ahead of them; they cannot overtake him. It grows lighter now, and the stars shine out through the filmy clouds.

Now they are in a valley; and lo ! the day has begun to break. Underneath the overhanging side of a mountain their leader halts. They are spent with the toilsome march and lie down upon the soft earth. Just as the rosy light of dawn touches the mountain-tops, dancing from peak to peak, they fall asleep. In their troubled dreams they see once more the Mohawk villages, their hunting grounds in the Adirondacks, and those who are dear to them.

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They recall the words of the old sachem when he said he feared that where many departed few would return.

How long they slept they knew not. Suddenly they became conscious of some power which awoke them from their dreams. They arose affrighted and looked about them. Far above upon the mountain they saw a sight which congealed the very blood in their veins. A face, awful in its majestic proportions, looked down upon them. The eyes blazed with fire, and the brow was stern and solemn. The sky became dark, while the red lightnings flashed ominously about that impassive countenance, and the whole earth seemed to be shaken to its foundations. The sun, which had begun to slide down the western horizon, was obscured, and twilight slowly descended upon the land. The Mohawks fell upon their faces in terror.

"It is the Manitou!" one said, and another, breathlessly. An overwhelming, supernatural fear fell upon them all. The darkness came on apace. The darker it grew, so much the brighter became that awful face upon the mountain. The earth rocked. The forked

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lightnings quivered and writhed in the black gloom like a nest of angry serpents. Every line upon that face of flame was set and immutable as the features of inexorable justice. It did not soften at the sight of the terror displayed by the braves; not a line relaxed. The winds sighed mournfully through the stunted pines. It sounded like the blended sobbing voices of many mourners borne to them from far away. Then the voice of the Manitou, like the blast of a bugle, aroused them:

“Draw nearer, O my children, and listen to your judgment. Ye have made war upon your brethren, the Penacooks, and your hands are stained with blood. The Mohawks and the Penacooks are both children of Manitou, and should possess the land in peace: yet ye have warred. But it is not for this alone that the Manitou is angry. Unsummoned ye have entered into the sacred home of the Great Spirit, and the irrevocable penalty is death. But the Manitou is merciful. In sleep ye shall pass away to Ponemah, and your bodies shall be turned into bowlders upon this mountain-side; and they shall be as a remembrance to the

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medicine men who shall come hither to speak to the Manitou, that in the days to come they may tell it to his children, lest these too in like manner should offend."

As he finished speaking there rose from the mountain-top a song such as no man ever heard before. It was the song which is sung only in the presence of the Great Spirit. It thrilled the hearts of the Mohawks as the strings of a harp are thrilled when the hand of a master touches them and snaps them asunder. Their heads began to droop upon their breasts, and they fell asleep. A mist floated over the great face upon the mountain. When it had passed, there was no longer to be seen fire flashing from its eyes; the sun came out again, and the clouds disappeared. In the place where the Mohawk braves had stood were now to be seen only rough boulders of granite strewn upon the ground. A tiny spring burst forth from the spot, and its waters gurgled downward to the valley in a crystal thread-like stream.

Never again would the old sachem of the Mohawks look upon the face of his son Kon-assaden, and never again would the Mohawk

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warriors rally at his call. Among the cool, dark forests of the Adirondacks the old sachem wearily waited the coming of the young chief who had gone forth strong and hopeful, but who would not return. For many days there was anxious watching in the tribe. The days grew into months, and the months to years, before they ceased to hope that Konassaden and his warriors would reappear.

IV.

The golden maize was ripening in the meadows, the brown leaves floated softly to the ground, and the wood pigeons tried their wings by long flights for the journey southward. The martins had already flown, and diving loons were making preparations for their annual migration.

New wigwams graced the shores of the Winnepesaukee at Aquidaukenash, from which the smoke curled lightly upward and then slowly vanished beyond the thick forest. Peace had once more folded her wings over the tribe, and the heart of Wonalansett was glad.

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Happy days to Mineola were those which followed the rescue and return to Aquidaukenash, as she sat in the wigwam of Chocorua, her father, and wove her bridal gear.

But one there was in whose face no gladness shone. Rimmon, sitting by the side of her sister, watched Wonalansett and Mineola in their joy, and no smile lighted up her face, but instead a look of pain and sorrow settled down upon it, for she too loved the young sachem of the Penacooks. In their own happiness neither Mineola nor Wonalansett noticed the sadness and silence of Rimmon. Often in those days she would roam alone in the dark pine forests and listen to the winds sighing through the pine needles, which seemed to whisper of happier lands, where the sunlight fell softly down upon the valley and the mountain-top, like a smile of the Great Spirit. She would listen to the languid murmur of the wavelets on the shore of the lake, and fancy they told in undertones of Ponemah, where the aching heart would be at rest.

One day in the harvest time, when the meadows waved with golden maize, Wonalansett

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led Mineola to his own wigwam, and there was joy among the people of the tribe. Then there was a feast upon the shore of the beautiful Winnepesaukee, and all the tribe was there. Adiwando, the old medicine man, was there with all the rest; and when the feast was over the smoke of the pipe went curling upward in fantastic rings. The beautiful waters of the lake spread out before them, and beyond rose like grim sentinels the immutable mountains.

“Show us, O Adiwando, the future of Wonalansett and Mineola and the fortunes of the Penacooks,” said Chocorua.

The old man bowed his head upon his breast and for some time was lost in meditation. Then he waved his hand over the waters and said:

“Look upon the bosom of the water, O my people, and read what the future holdeth in store.”

Every eye was turned quickly toward the lake. As they looked a white mist, as it were a great wall, arose out of the water and, standing out like a shadowy curtain, obscured the land beyond. Slowly and indistinctly at first

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there appeared upon this background a vision which held spellbound every one. Upon the vapory curtain was seen a smiling land, where harvests rustled in the wind; peaceful villages with their graceful wigwams, and children at play; golden maize and grapes of wonderful size; peaceful rivers meandering through green meadows, and cool forests where wild roses grew among soft mosses.

Then the scene changed. They saw a great mountain whose side sloped gently to its base. Upon one side, which was bathed in light, they saw two forms beginning the ascent. They were young and buoyant with life. As they gayly climbed the mountain, the sun rose higher in the east. On every hand wild flowers sprang up, and the heavens were without a cloud. As they moved up the slope, hand in hand, the sunlight fell upon them gently, while soft breezes played lovingly in their dark locks. Now they have reached the crest of the mountain, and the sun is in the zenith. Slowly, then, they go down on the other side. As they passed along one could see that the forms were getting feeble, the step weak, and that they leaned upon

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each other for support. The sun went gliding down the western sky, and the base of the mountain already lay in shadow. The last beams shone caressingly upon the two forms at the foot of the mountain, where a wide sea laved the coast with its sparkling tide. Far away its waters stretched beyond the reach of human vision, and lapped the boundless shores of Ponemah. Near the shore, lightly rocking upon the waters, was fastened a canoe. Feebly the two embarked, and it went gliding away swiftly on the golden tide. Upon the two fading forms fell the last reflection of declining day, like a farewell word, until, passing out of sight, they neared the unseen shores beyond.

Like a thin mist the vision melted away. The lake lay in silver beauty at the feet of the Penacooks, and the far-away hills glimmered peacefully in the distance.

“Thus shall be the days of Wonalansett and Mineola, and peace shall dwell in the land of the young sachem,” said Adiwando.

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V.

For many days the tribe dwelt by the beautiful water, then journeyed to the dashing waterfalls and the fertile meadows of Amoskeag. Chill winds blew the dead leaves hither and thither, and white frosts nightly covered the vales.

It was a beautiful day in October. In her father's wigwam Rimmon sat with folded hands, and her eyes were fixed upon the far-off hills. Farther than the limit of the mountains bounding the horizon her vision penetrated that day. Farther than the sun-kissed sea, on the wings of thought she passed, and her eyes were wet with tears. As she gazed upon the forests from which the foliage had been scattered and upon the hills grown dry and brown, and as all the pain and bitterness of her aching heart came upon her, she wished that to such a land as Ponemah her steps might tend. Wearily she rose and went forth from the wigwam into the forest. All day the hunters had been roaming the woodlands in search of game, and now,

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as they returned, was heard the splash of paddles upon the river.

Toward the golden sunset the steps of Rimmon turned. She climbed the steep hill to the westward of the falls of Amoskeag. The last rays of the sun fell on the lofty crag on which she stood. Upon her face, which looked a carved image of the face of sorrow, the sunset hues cast a strange radiance. Long time she sat beside the lofty cliff, watching the red sky fade to gold, and then to cheerless gray. Thus she mused, had her own life been; every joy had faded, and only the sorrow remained.

She stood now upon the topmost edge of the cliff, and she chanted the death song of her race. Her voice was clear and sweet as the song of a bird. Her eyes were filled with tears as she took a farewell look at the river, sky, and plain.

When she did not return they sought her everywhere. At last at the base of the hill they found her, and tenderly bore her to the wigwam of Chocorua. There was grief throughout the tribe, and Wonalansett and Mineola gazed at her form through their tears. The old

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chief willed that Rimmon should rest in the forest at Aquidaukenash, where Passaconaway slept, and where he, too, wished one day to lie. So it was that they returned to the Lake.

Chocorua was now an old man. His sorrow made him doubly aged, and his form began to droop, and his step lost its vigor. The cold winds of winter chilled him, and he said to Adiwando that the sun of Chocorua was nearly set. And so one day the old chief folded his hands across his breast and fell asleep.

Long years Wonalansett ruled his people wisely and well. In all these years the tribe prospered and grew strong. Brave sons and comely daughters had fallen to the lot of Wonalansett and Mineola, and their hearts were glad. Many winters had sifted their snows over the land since Passaconaway passed to the Happy Hunting Grounds, and Wonalansett was now an old man whose form was bent, and his end seemed near. Mineola too was no longer young, as when in the days of long ago she had given her love to the young sachem by the sparkling waters of Winnetoesaukee. But through all these years their

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love had grown deeper and fuller, like the little stream which rises in far-off hills, growing as it flows on, until at last as a broad river it casts its wealth of waters into the wide sea.

It was sunset at Aquidaukenash, and the two sat at the door of their wigwam, watching the golden west. They were weary, and as they gazed they were thinking of that scene called up by Adiwando at their marriage feast so long ago.

They felt that they had reached the foot of the mountain of life. At their feet the wide ocean rolled its resistless tide, on which they would soon be borne away to the far-off Ponemah.

The hills grew a darker purple, and the sighing pines made music in their ears like the notes of some celestial harmony. Hand in hand they listened, while the peaceful light of love and trust illumined their faces.

In the whisper of the pines they heard another sound, the voice of the Great Spirit, and it called them softly to himself. The tired eyes closed and, locked fast in each other's arms they fell asleep, and their bark went gliding out to sea.

THE END.





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